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After decade of change, U.S. gets peek behind Laos curtain

By Anne Keegan
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VIENTIANE, Laos—This secretive country last week pushed back tangled jungle overgrowth, turned a rusty lock and opened its door just a crack. It was the first time in 10 years.

Not since 1975, when Saigon fell to the communists and the Americans hastily abandoned all of Indochina, has reclusive Laos reopened its front door and let so many Americans in.

It was an unprecedented move for this landlocked country, referred to once by an American who fought here as "the nefarious Switzerland of Asia."

Yet, the door did voluntarily swing open—though briefly—and through it were allowed to pass a 12-member American military team and an 8-member entourage of the American media.

For a country so suspicious of the United States that it allows only a skeletal U.S. Embassy staff and two other Americans to live in the nation, it was a dramatic move.

The American soldiers [who came wearing jeans and T-shirts, not uniforms; carrying shovels and picks, not guns] arrived quietly on an American military cargo plane and bivouacked in the jungle 500 miles from the capital of Vientiane intent only on searching for the remains of 14 American airmen missing in action from the Vietnam War.

The American media, which have seen little of Laos in the 10 years it has been communist controlled, caught a quick glimpse not only of the capital but also of the provincial towns of Savanakhet and Pakse. The group landed in a Russian-made plane on Central Intelligence Agency-built runways across which water buffalo now placidly plod and next to which once-bustling Air America hangars rust out and decay in the jungle sun.

Vientiane, of course, is not the same as it was before the Americans left in 1975. Unlike Hanoi, or sections of South Vietnam, it has not gone grim or gray. But it is not the same.

It never was a bustling, grabby, shoulder-to-shoulder Asian metropolis. It always has been a languid town, similar to southern U.S. towns along the Mississippi—easygoing, slow moving and wide open.

It still is. Vientiane's only hotel for foreigners, the Lane Xang, sits on the banks of the Mekong River. The road between the river and the country's one major hotel sees few cars. Mostly one hears the wh-r-r-r-r of bicycle tires and the tinny horns of motorbikes. Weeds grow along the river banks, and after dark the sounds of cicadas and gloating frogs fill the night. A raucus call of a river duck occasionally intrudes.

What restaurants were left after the war now close down at 9:30 p.m.

The old Vietnam War hangouts, those that served as centers of intrigue, relaxation and lust, no longer exist. The White Rose, where bar waitresses danced naked with the customers, is closed. Madame Lulu's, the infamous bordello on the Mekong, is long gone.

The Third Eye, a hippie hangout for the Western world's long-haired, pot-smoking youth, can't be found.

There's no late dancing at Le Spot. No opium dens. And the pizza parlor run by the ex-Air America pilot has disappeared. There's no pizza at all now in Vientiane.

No men in Levis, gold Rolexes, black sapphire rings and Hawaiian shirts huddle at night over drinks talking in Oklahoma drawls. The city that once housed Russian agents and CIA pilots, smugglers and pot smokers, prostitutes and gold dealers, "advisers" from both sides back from the jungle fighting each other, isn't quite the same.

The luxury items available back when America was giving Laos an average of $50 million a year in economic aid and $300 million a year in military aid, aren't around.

There are few cars that still run. There are no parts available. No more than a dozen stoplights exist in Vientiane, yet the citizens on bicycles dutifully stop despite the fact that nobody else is at the intersection. In this city, there are no traffic jams.

This is the city where during the war an American announced, "There are no laws here against sex, drugs, religion or race. There are no antiabortion or birth-control laws. You can wear whatever you want and do whatever you want, and no one will care."

They care now.

Where once there were Americans on the street, there now are Russians. What broke down since the Americans left probably has not been fixed.

The soldiers around, though discreetly in the shadows, are Vietnamese.

Most of the entrepreneurs and shopkeepers—the ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, Pakistanis and Indians—fled when the communists took over in 1975. Many shop stalls sit empty.

But being river people, they are experts at smuggling. Many a humble Laotian home in Vientiane has a television set—often tuned in not to the satellite-sent Russian programs available but to Thai TV.

Though the city no longer has the air of tropical decadence, marijuana still can be bought at the morning market.

"Remember," said a Westerner, "the Golden Triangle is still right out there, and the poppies are still a-blooming."

Laotians in the city make an average of 300 kip a month [108 kip to $1 on the official market] and receive from the government 44 pounds of rice a month. A government employee makes an average of 600 kip a month.

"There was an Englishman working in Vientiane, and he hired a cleaning lady for his office for $10 a month," said another Westerner. "The government came to him and asked him please not to do that for his cleaning lady would be making more than the government officials themselves."

As cautious as the Laotians are about Americans [American Embassy staff members are not allowed to venture farther than 3½

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miles from downtown Vientiane] they are neither impolite nor abrupt.

A basically reserved and docile people, they seemed fearful of being charmed by American ebullience and by American guests bringing their dollar bills, their cigarettes, their Scotch and their many questions.

"The Laotians are too easygoing to become communists," Laotian Prince Souvanna Phouma once said. He was only half wrong.

Buddhism still thrives in Laos. Nowhere, in Vientiane or out in the country, does one see strident government slogans painted on walls, fences or government buildings. The only military visible generally are local militia soldiers in the provinces who often wear ill-fitting green uniforms, but no shoes.

At the hotel in Vientiane, a guest must pay in U.S. dollars. A map of Vientiane, sold to foreigners by the government, must be paid for in U.S. currency. The map, left over from the war, was printed by the U.S. Army Topographic Command, Washington, D.C.

Although there are abandoned Esso stations, one also sees Pepsi umbrellas over street vendors' wagons. Many of the children sport American T-shirts.

Laos has slid back in time rather than moved forward into the 20th Century on a rigorous communist agenda. But now, it appears, Laos wants to shuffle off 10 years of sleeping in its own jungle shade. Though Laotian leaders are guarded in their words and defensive about the past, the words they utter about the U.S. are softer than they've been before.

Laos is one of the poorest countries in the world. Ten years after the U.S. lost the war and left Southeast Asia, the Laotians are pushing for America to lift its ban on aid to Laos and give them financial help.

The U.S. government has let Laos know that nothing can happen in terms of aid until Laos makes an effort to begin to account for the 576 American servicemen missing in action in that country.

Laos took the first step last week when it allowed American planes into its airspace, American soldiers onto its soil and American journalists in to nose around.

"The [MIA] search shows our readiness for cooperation, and there are possibilities for more cooperation in the future," said Laos Vice Foreign Minister Soulivong Phrasitthideth.

"But, as we say in Laos, when we want to clap, we need two hands."

Last week, Laos opened the door a crack. Soon, perhaps, it will be ready to applaud.